

The Excavation of History in Michelle Cliff's Fiction

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History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge the exposition of its roots.

Michel Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*

Only a dialogue with the past can produce originality

Wilson Harris, *Enigma of Values*

Michelle Cliff's novel *Abeng* opens with a reference to the geological history of the island of Jamaica: 'The island rose and sank. Twice. During periods in which history was recorded by indentations on rock and shell' (Cliff 1984: 3). But even geological history is not immune to being recruited to serve invented traditions and elitist genealogies, for just a few pages later we see the father of the novel's protagonist, Clare Savage, expounding on his theory that the islands of the West Indies were no less than the remains of Atlantis, the floating continent celebrated by Plato. Or perhaps they were submarine mountains that erupted in the Atlantic when Atlantis slipped under the Mediterranean. Whatever the details, the impetus of Mr. Savage's theories is steady and clear: he seeks to establish Jamaica and his own family as direct and continuous extensions of the highest promise of European history and tradition. In doing so, he strives to paper over the genealogy derived through his wife – a genealogy that connects Clare to the folk wisdom descended from her Carib, Ashanti, and Dahomey ancestors and the rebellious spirit of the Maroon

warriors and slave women of the eighteenth century. This history is never articulated by or to Clare though its signs pervade the novel.

As a bildungsroman, *Abeng* explores the contest over Clare's inheritance to explain her ambivalence about her class position and her sexuality, suggesting furthermore that the disorientation Clare experiences is indispensable for the emergence of a historical consciousness that would serve as the enabling condition of a critical and activist subjectivity. The opening image of *Abeng* is thus a pointed allusion to one of Cliff's enduring concerns in this and subsequent works such as *No Telephone to Heaven* and *Free Enterprise*: the recovery of lost histories and the rehabilitation of suppressed traditions of resistance to slavery, racism, and exploitation in Jamaica and the U.S. Simultaneously, the novels adumbrate a parallel history of co-optation into structures of oppression in a world presented not as 'out there' but complexly integrated into a global system. To this end, the novels explore the dialectical and mutually creative relations between the ways people make history as actors and as narrators, plotting the way buried history exerts its seemingly gravitational pull on the accidental and sometimes tragic nature of their political involvement. Cliff's interrogations of received history and her attempts to weave a counter-hegemonic account of the past seek to establish a radical genealogy for the political and cultural interventions of liberation struggles in the Black Atlantic.¹ However, she does not move backwards into the centuries of the past to reconstruct a consciousness and rebuild a shattered identity, but rather anticipates the uncertain mysteries of a new identity built upon a recognition of the utopian possibilities of the past, their repeated betrayal by greed and complacency, and the relevance of this dual heritage to the miserable conditions of the present-day black diaspora. In doing so, she illuminates the fault lines in the projects of historical reconstruction and imaginative memory undertaken by historians and novelists of the Caribbean.

¹ Cliff's novels follow the course set by Paul Gilroy in his book, *The Black Atlantic*, charting the structures of feeling and intercultural positionalities that come about as a result of travel and displacement. All her protagonists are situated in the 'rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation' that Gilroy maps (1993: 4).

The impenetrable silence that cloaks vast areas of colonial history has long been a thorny issue for postcolonial and diasporic writers.² Haitian anthropologist and historian Michel Trouillot, in his *Silencing the Past*, has explored the processes by which important nuances and defining conflicts of the past have been suppressed by colonial and metropolitan historians as well as by postcolonial national elites. According to Trouillot, silence enters historical production at four crucial moments: when the facts are created and sources made; when facts and sources are assembled into archives; when facts are retrieved and retrospective narratives are composed; and when historical significance is assigned. These silences are compounded by the deliberate acts of censorship and destruction by postcolonial national elites who erect their own invented traditions and imagined communities over the ruins of the past. A historian who seeks to uncover the complex histories of resistance to slavery and colonization, especially the internal struggles twisting and cording that resistance, comes up against these silences at every step. As a consequence, the historian's archaeological undertaking involves mapping the lines of the discursive power that articulates history as much as teasing the silence out of historical narratives by brushing them against the grain.

However, even as Trouillot speaks of his yearning to resolve the enigmas and fill in the missing details of his history, he finds himself faced with the impossibility of ever arriving at a definitive and whole picture of the past. The archives are incomplete; chroniclers fail to recognize and record events and personages important to postcolonial history; and Eurocentric assumptions about historical significance have seen to it that all we can have is a partial vision of the past. Most importantly, Trouillot realizes that the

² See for instance, C.L.R. James' brilliantly revisionist *The Black Jacobins*, where he suggests that the plantation slaves under Toussaint L'Ouverture, who first revolted against their owners, and then maintained their independence in the face of imperialist designs by France, Spain, Britain, and the United States, represent the earliest formation of democratic consciousness, one that challenged and shaped the principles of universal brotherhood articulated by the French Revolution. James' point here is not just that Caribbean radicalism did not derive from European models, but from the insurrectionary traditions of the Arawaks, Caribs, and West Africans. Rather, James also seeks to demonstrate how the political possibilities that emerged in San Domingue teach far reaching lessons about change, politics, and power for the world of the Caribbean and beyond. His project, then, is nothing short of retelling the global narrative of social democracy. V.S. Naipaul, especially in his *The Loss of El Dorado*, has unflinchingly explored the pitfalls attending the project of historical recovery. The novels and critical writings of Wilson Harris centrally engage with this project as well. The many references to 'Toussaint and the black Jacobins' in Cliff's *Free Enterprise* situate it explicitly within this trend with the significant difference that it, like her other novels, focus on the hidden history of women's insurrections in the African diaspora thereby correcting the androcentric biases of extant national narratives.

most assiduous of historians cannot escape the selectivism that is the necessary and enabling epistemological condition of his work; he cannot transcend the limits imposed by his own position in history, his ideological affiliations, and most of all his investment in historical knowledge. This realization prompts another one: that the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contributions of groups and individuals, often antagonistic and always with unequal access to the means of discursive production. In other words, the historian's concern with hidden truths and their representation leads to the question of epistemological authority and from that, quickly, to socio-economic influence.

According to Trouillot, the turn to hitherto neglected sources and the emphasis on unused facts are important developments in historiography. The radical historian who seeks to recover the lost and suppressed stories of the past must find a way of making the silence yield its secrets without restricting himself to simply enlarging the empirical base. That is, instead of seeking a more accurate reconstitution of the past, the radical historian seeks to arrange existing facts into new narratives that speak to the silences of traditional history. Hemmed in by a desire to avoid neo-empiricism on one side and a desire to be historically credible on the other, all Trouillot can do is to marshal forth suggestive juxtapositions, leaving the reader to complete the act of interpretation. Still ruled by the protocols of credible history, Trouillot proceeds on this task by drawing out juxtapositions that suggestively whisper against the silences he identifies.

Cliff's narratives similarly juxtapose characters and events with the buried and forgotten history of the Caribbean. She turns repeatedly to the absence of certain strands of historical memory in people's perception of their past and the collusion of patriarchal and class interests in this loss. In doing so, she stages the structural deferment that Jacques Derrida argues is the mark of authentic historicity of thought. Cliff's search to understand the origins of the co-presence of fatalism and random violence as responses to poverty and deprivation in contemporary Jamaica takes her to the conditions of plantation life in the eighteenth century: 'In the beginning there had been two sisters--Nanny and Sekesu. Nanny fled slavery. Sekesu remained a slave [...] It was believed that all island children were descended from one or the other' (1984: 18). Very quickly, however, this originary historical parable is shadowed by others--the failure of the alliance between

Nanny and Cudjoe who was another Maroon leader, the betrayal of the Maroons by black slaves loyal to their masters, the rivalry and then the alliance between the Miskito Indians and the Maroons, the abortive attempt by the Maroons to strike and alliance with Spain against Britain, and so on. Cliff sets up this amplification of possible origins to displace simple, unilateral narratives of the progress or decline of the Jamaican people, and thereby creates an opening for contingency, accident, and radical rupture of tradition and its narratives. In this respect, her narrative flows along the course of contemporary discussions of historical consciousness such as those of Trouillot and Derrida, for whom an awareness of the impossibility of seizing firmly upon the origin of historical being and significance is the necessary ground for any 'authentic thought of Being as History, as well as historicity of thought' (Derrida 1978: 153). However, Cliff's purpose in destabilizing the epistemological foundations of received history is unequivocally political in its implications. Instead of staging a nostalgic revival of suppressed narratives, her novels undermine traditional history to clear the ground for an alternative, radical, empowering tradition of resistance and, more importantly, highlight forgotten aspects of subaltern activism.

In Cliff's narratives, the courses of action plotted by Nanny in Jamaica, or Mary Ellen Pleasant in Ante-bellum U.S. never run straight and steady to their desired goal, but rather suggest lessons about the centrality of chance in historical event as well as historical narrative. Maria Helena Lima has suggested that this emphasis on contingency in Cliff's narratives indicates a weakening of political resolve, a failure of revolutionary hope. But it may also be argued that Cliff's repeated focus on the revolutionary entity (whether it be Nanny, Mary Ellen Pleasant, Annie Christmas, or Clare Savage) who is on the brink of a consciousness of 'having been,' in full confrontation with its annihilation, paradoxically allows for a fuller apprehension of the contours of resistance. As her characters shatter themselves against death, as Heidegger would put it, they and the readers are able to fully apprehend the authentic temporality and historicity of oppositional subjectivity (Heidegger 1962: 430-437). Only in the consciousness of the possible annihilation of political opposition can its radical contingency be fully grasped, not only as a promise of tradition, but as a phenomenological and existential necessity, Cliff's novels repeatedly suggest. This is the full implication of the deadly ambush on

Clare and her comrades with which *No Telephone* ends. So it is, also, that in *Free Enterprise* Mary Ellen Pleasant muses on the circumstances surrounding the hanging of John Brown and stares mortality in the face as her ship is tossed about on stormy seas to conclude, 'I have grown so weary of interrupted conversations. That is what death is. It breaks off words between people. It leaves you with a longing for one last talk' (Cliff 1993: 157). This recognition becomes the impetus for her long letter to Annie Christmas in which she lays out the circumstances of her own coming into revolutionary consciousness and the details of her political and philosophical differences with John Brown, all the while being watched by the 'hologrammatic apparition' of Malcolm X which tells her 'I am with you always' (Cliff 1993: 157). The imminence of death here gives full urgency to the novel's representation of history as event, narrative and genealogy.

Cliff identifies education and popular culture as the primary mechanisms that render unthinkable the history of Black feminine resistance, and direct history along cliché-ridden plot lines. For instance, Clare is taught by her teacher at St. Catherine's that white Christians were 'the 'ordained' protectors of other peoples' that 'the primitive religiosity of Africans [...] had brought Black people into slavery' (1984: 71). Clare and her friend Zoe mostly learn the history of English monarchs. What they do learn of the Jamaican history is what pertained to English sovereignty there: 'the names of admirals who secured the island from the Spanish, the treaties which had made the island officially British [...] the introduction of rubber planting after sugar failed, the importation of 'coolie' labor after the slaves were freed' (1984: 84). In *No Telephone to Heaven*, a young American history teacher takes Clare and her classmates to see *Gone with the Wind*, which she presents to the schoolgirls as a 'documentary' about a 'tragic phase of American History' (95). Jamaican history does not escape the misprisions of popular culture either, for as Harry/Harriet puts it, 'our homeland is turned to stage set too much' (1996: 121). Rounding out this ironic line is the final destruction of Clare and her rebel comrades, which takes place around the set of a Hollywood recreation of the encounter between the eighteenth century Maroon leaders Nanny and Cudjoe. Coached by a retired civil servant, the actors deliver a cleaned-up and made-over version of the rebellion, suitably glossed over by the conventions of Hollywood romantic adventure, complete

with a man in a tree got up as the Forest God in a suit of 'long red hair, fiery, thick' (1996: 207). Hollywood is interested in Jamaica according to the film's director because the country is all tied up by the IMF. As the government planes strafe the rebels, the novel's conclusion reveals the deadening effects of the violent alliance between the hyperrealism of popular culture and the exploitation of multinational capitalism against the radical traditions Clare seeks to revive.

As Trouillot (1995) has suggested, an oppositional historian who has to operate within the protocols of his discipline cannot do much more than illuminate the lines of power girding historical narratives, and push his own oppositional narratives against them. Cliff, however, takes the task of the radical historian to be one of ensuring that the suppressed stories get told, that their forgotten protagonists be remembered, and most of all that the ambiguous political possibilities they represented be revived in their remembrance. As Mary Ellen Pleasant observes in *Free Enterprise*, '[t]he winner names the age [...] But then again even when we are the winners--not of ages, my dear, of moments--our victories are not recorded, not really [...] Liberation is not achieved; it is handed down' (137). Recording momentary victories of subaltern resistance then become a way for Cliff to draw the plotlines of what is unthinkable within the frameworks of traditional histories of the Caribbean and the U.S. Pierre Bourdieu, in theorizing what he calls 'the unthinkable of an epoch,' argues that structures and instruments of thought such as concepts, problematics, and methodologies place certain ideas and arguments beyond the pale of recognition and analysis. The resulting regime of intelligibility, or habitus, is in effect 'history turned to nature' and misrepresents the results of historical events as 'the way things are' (Bourdieu 1977: 78). Cliff's agenda seeks to reverse precisely this current of habitus, revealing thereby the history embedded in the nature of her characters and the landscape they inhabit.

Cliff's politically interested investigation into the past, especially into the workings of patriarchal power and its regime of heterosexuality as they colluded and collided with slavery's heritage of racism, contrast oral culture and folk traditions to the history her characters learn from popular culture and history lessons. Equally, they juxtapose myths, superstitions, rituals, and songs signifying a forgotten past against the cultural embarrassments, oddities, and riddles of everyday life in the present. Rather than

being guided by standards of 'good history,' her narratives are explicitly driven by the desire to account for the past in ways that contextualize and lend urgency to her protagonists' actions. While Trouillot seeks to conjure up the silenced segments of the narrative of the Haitian revolution and still be true to his sources, Cliff's tales become compelling because they are in contestation with the history -- both events and their official accounts -- that begets them and makes them relevant. Hers is an invocation of the past, moved forward by juxtapositions, contrasts, fortuitous coincidences, and the haunting presence of traces that we can only read as the return of the colonial repressed.

So it is that in *Abeng* the narrator intersperses the story of Clare's childhood with long disquisitions on the history of slavery and Maroon rebellion in Jamaica. Though Clare and the people around her are ignorant of this history, the reader is made to see that their actions are driven by its obscure yet persistent presence, which is underlined for us by narratorial asides and intertextual references. Clare's ill-fated boar hunt gains historically resonant meaning in just this fashion when she is described as a 'sorcerer's apprentice' and thereby inserted into a genealogical line that links her through her mother and grandmother to Nanny, the rebellious Maroon who was betrayed by Cudjoe which, significantly, is the name of the boar that Clare sets out to hunt. In *No Telephone to Heaven*, Brother Josephus preaches to a skeptical congregation a sermon turning on the multiple resonances of the name of a minor character:

You name mean the bearer of Christ...Christ come wid Columbus. Christ come with Christophine [...] what some island people call de cho-cho. Is de fruit of Lickle Jesus [...] Med me tell of dis Black man who carry Christ amongst de Black people of Haiti. Christophe was de pure Black man who lead the Black people of Haiti dem against de mixed-up ones who want fe control de Africans dem. Jus like ya so in Jamaica [...] But Bredda Christophe bear Lickle Jesus in him heart. And Toussaint, Bredda All-Saint, him know fe we Jesus too (37-38)

The complex history of Christianity in the Caribbean, its deep roots in the discovery and colonization of the New World and plantation slavery, as well as the history of slave rebellions is deftly presented in this sermon, which foreshadows and valorizes the mayhem unleashed by this character a few pages later.

At the heart of Cliff's endeavor is her engagement with power which, her novels suggest, creates and authenticates history's narratives and in turn is consolidated by them. As *Abeng* proceeds, we find that just as tectonic plate shifts sculpt the island's topography, so too does its more recent history of European discovery and conquest, slave trade, plantation economy, and the popular insurgency determine the contours of contemporary Jamaican culture. Yet it is this more recent history that is obscure to Clare Savage, who only dimly comprehends its existence and effect. Cliff plays with the paradox of the concealment of recent history by a more distant one, and suggests that the 'rock and shell' of the landscape may bear the inscriptions of the more recent violence wrought on the land. The stories that Mr. Savage tells his daughter about his white ancestors, while driven by the color consciousness of Jamaican society, gain credibility from the ruins of the family's plantation home to which he takes his daughter. Once called Runaway Bay and now being converted by developers into a summer home named Paradise Plantation, the decaying plantation house puts in view shreds of ornate wallpaper as well as the foundation stones of the slave cabins. But while Clare acknowledges her family's past wealth and glory, she is quite unable to read other, more troubling storylines. For instance, she cannot see that the wych elms that her ancestor brought from England to make his plantation home more like an English country estate have long fallen to the tropical climate, or that the vegetation all around is luxuriant because the ground is fertilized by the ash from the bones of rebellious slaves (30).³

Against Boy Savage's version of how the islands came about may be placed the narrator's account of the cockpit country, the setting of Nanny's famed resistance against the British. A place full of 'seemingly purposeless crevasses,' the landscape of the cockpits was created when the island sank during the Pliocene period to produce a place that was perfect for guerrilla warfare, full of '[s]wallow holes. Cockpits. Places to hide. Difficult to reach' (1984: 21). The land also testifies to ongoing violence in Jamaica. For instance, the swimming hole where a young man drowns while his companions jeer at

³ It is impossible here not to remember the symbolic place given to the wych elm in E.M.Forster's *Howards End*, where the tree evokes and commemorates forms of community and collectivity in agrarian England that are threatened by the ever-creeping 'red dust' of urban blight. Against this reference, we might read the failed attempt by Clare's ancestor to naturalize the elms in his Jamaican estate as Cliff's comment on the project of inventing traditions and thereby a history.

him for being a homosexual comes to be named after him. His mother, crazed by the tragedy wanders the area looking for the ghost of her dead son, which every tree seems to harbor. The topography of Cliff's Jamaica thus becomes the perfect setting for a story of resistance which is moreover shot through with the subtext of struggles between men and women. Foreshadowed in *Abeng* in the encounter between Nanny and Cudjoe is her eventual betrayal by him which causes his band to be known as the 'King's Negroes' (22)⁴. The land seems to mark Cudjoe and his men with signs of their treason: 'His black skin was reddened from the bauxite in the earth. His followers – those who now surrounded him – were also reddened men' (21). Heraldically aligning Cudjoe's men with their erstwhile enemy, the redcoats, bauxite returns in *No Telephone to Heaven* as the immediate cause of the armed rebellion by Clare and her compatriots as well as their annihilation at the end of the novel.

Clare's inability to see this history is damaging, indeed costly for her psychic and political wholeness and well-being. But how does Cliff vindicate this prioritization politically and epistemologically? That is, how does she establish the priority of these suppressed stories over the family history Boy Savage tells his daughter? Hayden White says that the point of all historical narrative is to establish moral authority but Cliff moves beyond making a claim for moral authority. Hers is a critique of contemporary social arrangements and the historical narratives that support them, as she delineates a genealogy for both contemporary Jamaican politics and the radical actions necessary to upset them.

Adopting a strategy of suggestive and evocative juxtaposition, the narrator of *Abeng* intersperses Clare's story with long accounts of colonial history and maroon legend that Clare herself does not yet know. Of these accounts the most resonant is the love story of Inez, Judge Savage's half-blood mistress, and Mma Alli the one breasted warrior woman who 'represented a tradition that was older than the one which had enslaved them' (34). Mma Alli taught the slaves how to escape and when. She tries to pass on to the next generation the knowledge she brought from Africa, but her pleas that

⁴ Clare herself is marked at this point in the narrative as straddling the two lines of the history of African resistance in the Caribbean: the rebellion of the Maroons and slaves and their collaboration with white plantation owners and the Crown. Historically, the contradictions between these lines came to a head in the figure of Paul Bogle and the brutal repression of slave insurgency by General Eyre.

this knowledge not be forgotten go unheeded after the abolition of slavery in 1838. The narrator laments that by the 1950s, the people of Jamaica had no idea of their past:

They did not know of the kingdom of the Ashanti or the Kingdom of the Dahomey, where most of their ancestors had come from. They did not imagine that Black Africans had commanded thousands of warriors. Built universities. Created systems of law. Devised language. Wrote history. Poetry. Were traders. African diplomats. (20)

This history, whose traces survive largely in the oral traditions of folk culture, remains buried under the viciousness of the daily grind of life in the shanty towns. The life-giving function of its knowledge is displaced by the partial or irrelevant facts of European culture and activity. The people of Jamaica also do not know that their ancestors had been paid to inform on one another and had been given their freedom for becoming the ‘blackshots’ of their white masters. Clare shares this ignorance and the novel proceeds by juxtaposing her groping awareness of what she does not know with a fully excavated narrative history of rebellion and collaboration on the island. In part, this strategy serves to establish a connection between what Clare dimly perceives and the acts of solidarity she intuitively performs. It also demonstrates how a lost history can be retrieved in scraps and cobbled together as an explanatory narrative.

From the configuration of the landscape, the names of various places in the island, and the island's flora and fauna, the older Clare of *No Telephone to Heaven* gleams signs of the traumas of the past. The miscellany of Arawak, West African, and Spanish names of various sites signal not only history of the island, but also ways of knowing inscribed there. For instance, the cockpit country, which is the setting for part of *No Telephone to Heaven*, was known in the eighteenth century as the ‘Land Of Look Behind,’ in reference to the caution required of English soldiers who traversed the area to root out the Maroons (Floyd 1979: 12; 41/42). Cliff's 1985 collection of essays takes as its title this eighteenth-century appellation, one that survives to this day, as a way of alluding to the Maroon tradition of resistance. As well, the events of *No Telephone to Heaven* and the tenor of many of the essays in *The Land of Look Behind* suggest that caution is equally demanded of contemporary inhabitants of the island, especially those who seek social change and an end to poverty and exploitation. They too are likely to be ambushed by the sometimes

inconvenient legacy of the Maroons, one of resistance and betrayal, when they least expect it. More tantalizing is the suggestion that as much as dominant discourse seeks to deny the suppressed history of maroon resistance, the latter is always waiting to ambush the former. In this respect, ambush is a fortunate and redeeming fate. The very land, then, becomes the text on which is inscribed in code the history of her people. It ambushes its inhabitants with unexpected and astonishing revelations.

In this project of seeking traces of lost histories in the land, what aids the historian is the basic assumption that events leave traces, some of which are quite concrete -- buildings, dead bodies, censuses, monuments, diaries, political boundaries -- whose sheer material mass support certain historical narratives while throwing into the shadows others. It is in this sense that the production of historical narratives is always also the creation of silences, which are 'inherent in history because any single event enters history with some of its constituting parts missing. Something is always left out when something else is recorded [...] Thus whatever becomes fact does so with its own inborn absences, specific to its production' (Trouillot 1995: 49). What Cliff shows is that it is possible to resist the pull of the concrete traces of historical events and view them eccentrically so as to focus on what is in their shadows. Her novels repeatedly show how secrets encrypted in the land have a way of rising up to the surface unexpectedly, only to be met with incomprehension by a society unwilling and unable to embrace fully its historical legacy of suffering and rage. Her protagonists are frequently unaware that they seek the truth about their past, and when they stumble upon it they often do not recognize its significance. Yet, the narrative development of Cliff's novels suggests that despite being only half-perceived, these truths do direct and sustain the protagonists in their quest for self-knowledge and justice, albeit in untidy, accidental ways which have mixed results. In *Abeng*, Cliff stages this return of repressed history as an event that propels the protagonist Clare, into an agonized self-awareness. When Clare and Zoe take off on a clandestine hunt for Massa Cudjoe the wild boar, all sorts of matters surge into focus: Clare's erotic attachment to Zoe, her investment in her class position, and the sexual hostility between men and women. The boar, who is never seen through all the momentous events of that day, becomes the presiding spirit, the overdetermined absent cause of Clare's awakening and action. Cudjoe, as we are told repeatedly, was also the Maroon warrior who, after a

brief alliance with Nanny, betrayed her; the word maroon itself is derived from *cimmarrón* (wild and untamed) or *marrano* (wild boar) (Floyd 1979: 41). Failing to sight the boar, Clare ends up accidentally shooting her grandmother's bull, Old Joe. In this symbolically charged episode, full of puns, mistakes, and accidents Clare, who is described as the sorcerer's apprentice, becomes identified as the inheritor of the legacies of both Nanny and Cudjoe, but in the moments before the fatal shooting of Old Joe, she enacts through her assumption of 'buckra' speech, the colonial positionality of the Redcoats and 'blackshots' who hunted Nanny and Cudjoe centuries earlier. The correspondences clarify and illuminate one another in a way explanatory commentary would not. The hunt thus becomes a synecdoche for the search for a usable past that propels the novel's protagonist towards principled political action.

Cliff engages in such a historical project in all her novels. She reads back from contemporary trauma to seek out its buried causes. Since what matters to her is less what history is than how it works, her narratives restlessly trace a pattern between the present and its multiple pasts. In this project, she takes black women as her exemplars:

Around the table they exchange facts--details of the unwritten past. Like the women who came before them--the women they are restoring to their work/space--the historians are skilled at unraveling lies; are adept at detecting the reality beneath the erasure. (1985: 33)

Like C.L.R. James, Cliff seems to view historiography as a profoundly revolutionary project, requiring social upheaval and massive political change, more so than decolonization or the mere cultural rejuvenation of the nation. The hidden reality these historians seek is the fact of power, for they understand, like Trouillot, that 'history is a story about power, a story about those who won' (Trouillot: 15). Cliff names their project of excavating history as a specifically feminine endeavor, one that is carried forward by a mistrust of influential narratives and aided by a highly developed ability to know about and reveal silenced versions of how the present came to be. If this ability comes out of women's long experience and recognition of the ways of the world from their positionality in the master-slave dialectic of plantation economy encounters, it also comes from their association with nurturance, of people, culture and -- here Cliff weighs against an essentialist constructions of maternal thinking -- revolutionary possibilities.

The historians--like those who came before them, mean to survive. But they know they may not. They know that though shadowy, the border guards have influence, and carry danger with them [...] And in the presence of this knowledge the historians plant, weed, hoe, raise houses, sew, and wash--and continue their investigations: into the one shot contraceptive; the slow deaths of their children; the closing up of vulvas and the cutting-out of tongues. (1985: 34)

Like these historians, Cliff excavates a history that pays particular attention to the ways violence marks the vicious and brutal forms taken by the resistance or simple rage that respond to it. This method is exemplified as Cliff exfoliates the island's history of violence in the commentary that concludes the account of Christopher's bloody rampage in *No Telephone to Heaven*:

NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN. No miracles. None of them knew miracles. They must run the damn thing upside down. Fight fire with fire. Burn. Yes burn it down [...] Cyaan tu'un back now. Capture the I in I. Then say Bless me Jah/ Shàngó /Yemanjá /Jehovah /Oshun /Jesus /Nanny /Marcus /Oshun. I am about to kill one of your creatures. Some of your children. (50)

Cosmologies and structures of feeling from the Old as well as the New World, the influence of oppositional historical figures in the Black Atlantic, and the real deprivation Christopher suffers in class-stratified Jamaica are all deftly evoked here to explain and contextualize the eruption of his rage.

No Telephone to Heaven shows that the evolution of Jamaican society was made possible by a heavy reliance on coercion to discipline first the slaves, and later the laboring classes made up of newly freed slaves and indentured laborers. As well, a high degree of political authority was concentrated in a small group of Afro-Caribbean administrators, merchants, and landlords whose social authority was secured by the imprimatur of whiteness. In this, the novel echoes Manning Marable's point that even as modern industries, urban developments, and new social classes emerged, the elitist and coercive orientation of the colonial state remained. Just as C.L.R. James dramatizes the way the revolution under Toussaint and Dessalines mirrored the brutality of slave holding regimes, Marable unfolds the ways the capitalist colonial state and its postcolonial successor in Jamaica was and is an expression of internal and external class hierarchies.

However, Cliff's representation of the connections between the time of the deprived present and the special appeal it makes to a usable past resonates with Walter Benjamin's evocation of the Angel of History who, facing the past is swept by the ironic storm of progress that 'keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage' into a future it cannot foresee (1969: 257). In the absence of a consoling vision of a redemptive future, the historian grapples with the 'constellation' his own era has formed with an earlier one establishing an understanding the present or the 'time of the now' which is shot through with 'chips of Messianic time' (Benjamin 1969: 263).

The specific charge of Cliff's engagement with messianic history becomes clear in the context of Marable's (1987) analysis of the history of Jamaica. Her insistence on the centrality of women in the process of history-making and her added suggestion that sexuality that resists the regime of hetero-patriarchy forges a consciousness that fully engages with capitalist oppression, vastly complicate his assessments which highlight, usefully but restrictively, the class politics of contemporary Jamaica. According to Marable, as the crown colony government gradually ended in the early part of the twentieth century, the Jamaican laboring classes in particular and the population in general was fragmented in their political aspirations. In this context, liberal and nationalist members of the petty bourgeoisie were able easily to assume leadership of the social and anti colonial revolts (19). So it is that while Michael Manley supported a Fabian-socialist agenda, his strong rejection of insurrectionism meant that the government did not hesitate to use systemic violence to maintain and ensure its electoral control. The result was a mixed economy in which the interests of the conservative national bourgeoisie and multi-national corporations prevail (159). In *No Telephone to Heaven*, Clare goes into cockpit country in 1982, after Jamaica was devastated by President Ford's decision to cut back trade in Bauxite and tourism and curtail USAID programs because Manley's populist style of democratic socialism was seen as a threat to U.S. interests. Since Marable sees modern nationalist consciousness in the Caribbean to be pre-figured by an untidy and incoherent trade union consciousness and organization, he is unable to see any signs of hope for the future. Cliff shifts this national narrative.

To do so she engages two tropes that centrally inform colonial history: what Trouillot calls 'formulas of erasure' and 'formulas of banalization' (1995: 96). Formulas

of erasure result in the total and general silence on the history of rebellion and resistance that is the underside of the history of colonial domination. Formulas of banalization tend to empty events of their revolutionary content so that they are undermined and trivialized. In *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, the repeated references to Nanny, the maroon insurgent who was betrayed and overshadowed by the more well-known Cudjoe, seek to redress the erasure and trivialization of female insurgency against colonial and patriarchal violence in colonial and nationalist histories. Cliff does not seem so much interested in retrieving the past as it really was, as to enact what Benjamin in a similar context saw to be the imperative of historical consciousness: 'to seize hold of a memory as it flares up at a moment of danger' (1969: 255). Her quest for historical consciousness is tied to her struggle to understand national identity at a particularly vulnerable moment in Jamaican history, though she is far from subscribing to a naive nationalism. Because she emphasizes the political and economic forces organizing nationalism in Jamaica, she also seems more ambivalent about it, and posits an alternative nationalism that springs as much from the fecund mysteries of the 'ruinate' as from the abject misery of the 'dungle.' She thus interrogates the idea of Jamaica, decentering both the idea of nation as primordial and its valorization as the optimistic promise of an evolving sense of peoplehood. Hers is an intense psychological interrogation that balks at an easy recuperation of a national spirit or psyche while at the same time steering clear of entirely materialist narratives of nationalism.

What is the retrospective significance of Cliff's interventions? What historical pressures do her novels respond to? Cliff's novels pose several questions that are urgent for the study of postcolonial and diasporic literatures: how can cultural unity and political solidarity be possible when the African diaspora is 'deeply riven by the shades of their skin, places traveled to and from, events experienced, things understood, food taken into their bodies, acts of violence committed, books read, music heard, languages recognized' (Cliff 1996: 4) and innumerable other factors? What happens when the traumas and misdeeds of the past are not confronted? What happens when the bitterness and fury of black people in the Americas is repeatedly papered over and their causes obscured further and further? Will it ever be possible to short-circuit the cycles of violence bred by this repression in the midst of bureaucratic posturing, religious hypocrisy, and middle-class

puffery? What are the oppositional positions available to black women against the historical inheritance of slavery during which the sexual regime of patriarchy was directed at the explicit retrieval of surplus value--as work and babies who would grow up to be slaves--through the enforcement of heterosexuality? All these questions lead back to the importance of understanding the past, accepting its blame, and embracing its empowering legacies. In this project, excavating lost histories and making the silences of the past speak is of central importance since as Trouillot puts it, 'The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots' (xix).

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